

January 7, 1964

Dr. Clemens E. Benda
Research Department
Walter E. Fernald State School
Waltham, Massachusetts

Dear Dr. Benda:

Thank you for having sent your reprint on personality factors in mild mental retardation, which I read again more carefully after having glanced at it in the original publication. I certainly concur with the cautions that you raise with regard to any monolithic interpretation of mental retardation. I find it just as exasperating to know how many educationists and sociologists are essentially ignorant of mechanisms of genetic action as it must be for them to view the more extreme geneticism and lack of appreciation of cultural factors on the part of a small minority of my own colleagues.

Reading your paper I was struck with the possibility that an incautious and uncritical reader might readily misinterpret your main point. You were careful to point out that the factor of family disorganization plays a critical role in leading to the institutionalization of an affected child; I am a little afraid that some less sophisticated readers might confuse this with your background discussion on the actual etiology of mild retardation.

Surely, with all the polemics of nature vs. nurture, the essential issue is the remediability of mild retardation by educational and social counseling efforts. This can only be determined empirically, not in any useful way by a priori argument. In assessing the results of any remedial measures, it should be of utmost importance to understand the nature of the sampling by which the subjects are obtained, and your work, among others, points out some of the special features of the institutionalized part of the subject population that might be most readily accessible for such trials.

Many of the assertions I have heard about the etiology of "socio-cultural retardation" have been very much more dogmatic than your discussion with respect to the role of genotypic factors in intelligence, and I do hope that more can be done to elevate the problem to the plane where it belongs, one of unprejudiced investigation of a subject concerning which we really know very little.

Have you thought critically about the statistics that you quote on page 24? The 0.1% of severe retardation would seem to refer to the institutionalized population, but what do we know of the fraction of affected individuals who are institutionalized under this heading? Does the reference to 3% as mildly

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retarded reflect anything more objective than the definition of retardation as the lowest 3-percentile? And of this last category would it be fairer to say: (1) in this range of intelligence socio-cultural factors play a predominant etiological role, or (2) in this range of intelligence socio-cultural factors play an essential role in the effective utilization of the inherent capacity of the individual. (That or should not be considered exclusive.)

I would be very pleased to continue to receive your publications.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics